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ABSTRACT

In multigrade instruction, children of at least a 2-year grade span and diverse ability levels are grouped in a single classroom and share experiences involving intellectual, academic, and social skills. "The Multigrade Classroom" is a seven-book series that provides an overview of current research on multigrade instruction, identifies key issues teachers face in a multigrade setting, and provides a set of resource guides for multigrade teachers. Book 2 offers guidelines for classroom organization that will accommodate the multiple activities occurring in the multigrade classroom. An activity centers approach to classroom design is outlined that designates classroom areas for specific purposes. General considerations during planning include the level of activity and noise likely to occur during different learning activities, use of visual barriers to define activity centers, placement of teacher and student resources, traffic patterns, age and physical size differences among students, and storage of student belongings. The teacher must be prepared to explain the room arrangement to students and parents. A list of questions clarifies classroom design principles and aspects of a particular classroom plan. Figures illustrate a comprehensive classroom layout and three self-contained classrooms organized in different ways. Presented in workbook fashion, a three-step design process involves describing the present classroom, identifying specific learning activities that will take place, and drawing the final plan. (Contains 24 references and 5 resources.) (SV)

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A Resource for Small, Rural Schools

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Book 2: Classroom Organization

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Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

THE MULTIGRADE CLASSROOM: A RESOURCE HANDBOOK FOR SMALL, RURAL SCHOOLS

Book 2: Classroom Organization

November 1999

Rural Education Program

Based on the September 1989 publication
of the same title written by Bruce A. Miller

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Overview

Preface

The preface describes the process used in developing this handbook, including the multigrade teachers who shared their classroom strategies and ideas for improving the usefulness of the handbook.

Introduction

The history of multigrade classroom instruction is presented, along with the background information that describes why multigrade instruction is an important and complex issue for educators.

Book 1: Review of the Research on Multigrade Instruction

In this book, the research on multigrade instruction is reviewed in order to answer two questions: (1) What effect does multigrade instruction have on student performance? and (2) What kind of training is needed in order to teach in a multigrade classroom? Detailed information focusing on organizing and teaching in a multigrade classroom is also presented.

Book 2: Classroom Organization

This book describes strategies for arranging and organizing instructional resources and the physical environment of the classroom. Sample classroom layouts and a "design kit" for organizing your classroom are also included.

Book 3: Classroom Management and Discipline

Establishing clear expectations for student behavior and predictable classroom routines has been shown to improve student performance. In this book, research relating to classroom management and discipline are presented, along with a checklist for planning management routines and discipline procedures.

Book 4: Instructional Organization, Curriculum, and Evaluation

Research-based guidelines for planning, developing, and implementing instructional strategies are presented. This book emphasizes the development of cooperative work norms in the multigrade classroom and explains how to match instruction to the needs of students. An overview of curriculum and evaluation planning concepts is also provided. This book is a close companion piece with book 5: Instructional Delivery and Grouping.

Book 5: Instructional Delivery and Grouping

This book emphasizes that instructional quality and student grouping are key components for success in the multigrade classroom. Instructional methods such as recitation, discussion, and cooperative learning are reviewed. Planning guides and examples are also included where appropriate. Strategies for organizing group learning activities across and within grade levels, especially those that develop interdependence and cooperation among students, are discussed.

Book 6: Self-Directed Learning

Developing skills and strategies in students that allow for a high level of independence and efficiency in learning, either individually or in combination with other students, is essential in the multigrade classroom. Ideas for developing self-direction are presented in this book.

Book 7: Planning and Using Peer Tutoring

This book provides guidelines for developing skills and routines whereby students serve as "teachers" to other students within and across differing grade levels. The research on what makes for effective tutoring in the classroom is also reviewed.

Preface

The development of this handbook began in 1987, when a group of people involved in rural education raised several issues regarding multigrade classroom instruction.

In their discussions, members of the advisory committee for the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's (NWREL) Rural Education Program agreed that multigrade teacher training in their respective states was either lacking or wholly inadequate. They also were concerned about the availability of research and training materials to help rural multigrade teachers improve their skills.

As a result of these concerns, the Rural Education Program decided to develop a handbook to assist the multigrade teacher. The handbook evolved in several stages. The first was a comprehensive review, conducted by Dr. Bruce Miller, of the research on multigrade instruction that included articles, books, and research reports from the United States, Canada, Australia, and other countries.

From this review, six topic areas emerged that are considered essential for effective multigrade instruction: classroom organization; classroom management and discipline; instructional organization, curriculum, and evaluation; instructional delivery and grouping; self-directed learning; and planning and using peer tutoring. Dr. Miller developed the handbook around these six instructional areas, and a draft was completed in June 1989, with support from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI).

The second stage occurred in July 1989, when a conference was held in Ashland, Oregon, with multigrade teachers who were recommended by educational leaders from throughout the Northwest and Pacific Island regions.

During the conference, participants were organized into workgroups, each focusing on one of the topic areas. Their tasks were to review the appropriate handbook chapter for clarity and content, to suggest alternative and/or additional instructional strategies to those presented in the handbook, and to write case descriptions of activities drawn from their classrooms. For example, Joel Anderson from Onion Creek Elementary in Colville, Washington, described how he grouped students for cooperative learning. Darci Shane from Vida, Montana, presented a school handbook she had developed for parents that included a class schedule and other school-related information. (A full list of participants appears at the end of this preface.) The final handbook was completed by Dr. Miller in September 1989.

Based on the growing interest and research on multigrade instruction the handbook was revised and updated in 1999, also with support from OERI. The final version, completed with support from the Institute of International Education (IIE), is now composed of a series of seven stand-alone books.

Book 1: Review of the Research on Multigrade Instruction
Book 2: Classroom Organization
Book 3: Classroom Management and Discipline
Book 4: Instructional Organization, Curriculum, and Evaluation
Book 5: Instructional Delivery and Grouping
Book 6: Self-Directed Learning
Book 7: Planning and Using Peer Tutoring

Purpose and Scope of the Handbook

The handbook has been written to serve three general purposes:

- To provide an overview of current research on multigrade instruction
- To identify key issues teachers face when teaching in a multigrade setting
- To provide a set of resource guides to assist novice and experienced multigrade teachers in improving the quality of instruction

However, because of the complexity of multigrade instruction and the vast amount of research on effective classroom instruction, this handbook can only serve as a starting point for those educators wanting to learn new skills or refine those they already possess.

Each book of the series presents information, strategies, and resources considered important for the multigrade teacher. While all the books are related, they also can stand alone as separate documents. For example, the books on Classroom Organization (Book 2) and Classroom Management and Discipline (Book 3) contain overlapping information. Ideally, these two books are best utilized together. The same is true of the books on Instructional Organization, Curriculum, and Evaluation (Book 4) and Instructional Delivery and Grouping (Book 5). Wherever possible, these relationships have been noted in the appropriate books.

In conclusion, the series of books has been designed to be used as a research-based resource guide for the multigrade teacher. It covers the most important issues the multigrade teacher must address to be effective in meeting the needs of students. Sample schedules, classroom layouts, resource lists, and strategies aimed at improving instruction have been used throughout. It is our hope that the handbook will raise questions, provide answers, and direct the multigrade teacher to resources where answers to other questions can be found.

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Introduction

In contrast to a historical pattern of children developing within an age-varied social system, many children today spend a majority of their time in an age-segregated milieu (Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman, 1990; McClellan, 1994). The results of this pattern of segregation are thought to contribute to a declining social support system and compromised development of children's social and academic skills.

Coleman (1987) suggests the need for a significant institutional and societal response to support functions traditionally filled by the family, such as the development of feelings of belonging and community, emotional and social bonding, and nurturance. Increasingly, the school has been viewed as one of the most effective and efficient contexts to address children's academic, affective, and social needs before these needs reach crisis proportions.

A growing body of research explores the influence of educational contexts on children's development. While interest has focused on the impact of the classroom environment on children's attitudes toward school, cognitive growth, and academic development, less direct attention has been given to the relationship between classroom context (including the structure and content of children's peer relationships) and academic and social development during the elementary years. One approach explored by theoreticians and researchers for encouraging children's academic and social skill development is multigrade instruction.

In multigrade instruction, children of at least a two-year grade span and diverse ability levels are grouped in a single classroom and are encouraged to share experiences involving intellectual, academic, and social skills (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Katz et al., 1990; McClellan & Kinsey, 1996). Consistency over time in relationships among teachers, children, and parents is viewed as one of the most significant strengths of the multigrade approach because it encourages greater depth in children's social, academic, and intellectual development. The concept of the classroom as a "family" is encouraged, leading to expansion of the roles of nurturing and commitment on the part of both students and teacher (Feng, 1994; Hallion, 1994; Marshak, 1994).

The potential academic and social implications of the multigrade concept of education are strongly supported by extensive research demonstrating the importance of peers in children's academic and social development, and by studies of reciprocity theory, which demonstrate the positive effect on child academic and social behavior of sustained close relationships between children and caregivers (Kinsey, 1998; Maccoby, 1992).

The adequate implementation of a multigrade approach to education extends beyond simply mixing children of different grades together. A positive working model of a multigrade classroom allows for the development of academic and social skills as the teacher encourages cross-age

interactions through tutoring and shared discovery. Social competence develops for older children out of their roles as teachers and nurturers, and for younger children out of their opportunity to observe and model the behavior of their older classmates (Katz et al., 1990, Ridgway & Lawton, 1969).

The multigrade classroom has traditionally been an important and necessary organizational pattern of education in the United States, notes Miller (1993). Multigrade education dates back to the one-room schools that were the norm in this country until they were phased out in the early part of the 1900s (Cohen, 1989; Miller, 1993). From the mid-1960s through mid-1970s, a number of schools implemented open education, ungraded classrooms, and multigrade groupings. Although some schools continued to refine and develop the multigrade concept, many of these programs disappeared from public schools. With the beginning of the industrial revolution and large-scale urban growth, the ideal of mass public education took root and the practice of graded schools began in earnest.

The graded school system provided a means of organizing and classifying the increased number of urban students of the 1900s. Educators found it easier to manage students by organizing them into age divisions or grades. Other factors, such as the advent of the graded textbook, state-supported education, and the demand for trained teachers, further solidified graded school organization (Miller, 1993; Uphoff & Evans, 1993). Critics of the graded school were quick to emphasize this deficiency. The realization that children's uneven developmental patterns and differing rates of progress are ill-matched to the rigid grade-level system has resulted in a growing interest in and study of the potential benefits of multigrade education in recent years (Miller, 1996). This growing interest is due to a greater focus on the importance of the early years in efforts to restructure the educational system (Anderson, 1993; Cohen, 1989; Stone, S.J., 1995; Willis, 1991) and an awareness of the limitations of graded education.

The multigrade classroom is labor intensive and requires more planning, collaboration, and professional development than the conventional graded classroom (Cushman, 1993; Gaustad, 1992; Miller, 1996). Sufficient planning time must be available to meet the needs of both teacher and students. Insufficient planning, staff development, materials, support, and assessment procedures will have an impact on the success of the multigrade program (Fox, 1997; Miller, 1996; Nye, 1993).

Despite these constraints, there are special advantages to multigrade classrooms. Flexible schedules can be implemented and unique programs developed to meet students' individual and group interests and needs. Combined classrooms also offer ample opportunity for students to become resourceful and independent learners. The multigrade rural classroom is

usually less formal than the single-grade urban or suburban classroom. Because of the small class size, friendly relationships based on understanding and respect develop naturally between the students and the teacher. In this setting, students become well-known by their teacher and a family atmosphere often develops.

However, many teachers, administrators, and parents continue to wonder whether multigrade organization has negative effects on student performance. For most rural educators, multigrade instruction is not an experiment or a new educational trend, but a forceful reality based on economic and geographic necessity. In a society where educational environments are dominated by graded organization, the decision to combine grades is often quite difficult. The Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory receives numerous requests from rural educators with two overriding concerns regarding multigrade classrooms:

- What effect does multigrade instruction have on student performance?
- What kind of preparation or training is needed to be an effective teacher in a multigrade classroom?

This handbook will provide answers to these questions and develop an overview of key issues facing school districts and teachers involved in or contemplating multigrade classrooms.

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Classroom Organization

In the typical multigrade classroom, where multiple activities are likely to occur at the same time, classroom organization is a critical factor in developing smooth, predictable routines. We also know from research on effective classroom practice that when students have a clear understanding of classroom structure, procedures, and rules, they are more likely to follow them, especially if they have had some involvement in decisionmaking. Although there is no single "best" way to arrange your classroom, there are some general guidelines that apply to most multigrade settings. Sample classroom floor plans and a planning kit have been included to aid you in laying out your own classroom.

The Activity Centers Approach

An **activity center** can be defined as any discernible pattern of student or teacher behavior that can be clearly described and labeled. One common example is seatwork, where students work independently at a desk. Another example is pairwork, where two students work together. Three or more students working together is generally characterized as groupwork. A classroom may also have areas designated for art, audio-visual equipment, computers, and other instructional resources. Each example reflects a type of activity where expectations for behavior may be clearly defined. An activity center is best described as an area of the classroom that the teacher has designated for a specific purpose.

Two other types of centers need to be distinguished from an activity center. A **learning center** is a term used to describe a self-instruction learning activity that has been placed in a clearly defined area of the classroom. It can be in any subject and generally includes objectives, instructions, and evaluation (see Book 5, Instructional Delivery and Grouping, for more detail).

Another type of center is a **subject area resource center**. This is an area where student resources relating to a specific subject are located. For example, resources relating to the study of science may all be located in one well-marked area of the classroom.

What types of activities normally occur in your classroom? What types of activities would you like to occur? Do you have group projects? Are there students who tutor? Do you meet with individual students and small groups?

Is it important for students to be self-directed, or to be able to help themselves with little teacher interruption? Answers to these questions should help you decide how to arrange your classroom in terms of the activities that engage students.

There are seven general types of activities found in most classrooms:

1. Quiet or individual study
2. Testing
3. Whole-class instruction
4. Partner work
5. Group discussions
6. Audiovisual and reference work
7. Teacher tutoring or small-group instruction

Furniture and equipment should be arranged to create activity centers appropriate to the type of activity you intend to occur.

In the multigrade classroom there may be many different kinds of activities going on at the same time. Some students in fourth and fifth grade might be working on a group art project while two students may be peer tutoring in math. Two first-graders may meet with the teacher, and several students might be completing independent assignments requiring the use of a tape recorder and the computer. The teacher's task is to arrange the classroom so that all these activities can take place at the same time with a minimum of disruption and of teacher direction and supervision.

General Considerations When Planning

When deciding how you would like your classroom organized, you must consider the types of behaviors that are appropriate during teacher instruction, student independent study, or small-group work and how the arrangement of your classroom will foster these different learning activities. Topics to consider when making decisions regarding classroom arrangement include the following:

Activity and noise level

When deciding how you will arrange your room in order to accommodate different learning activities, you must consider the level of activity and noise that is likely to occur. If students work together on a group activity, they are likely to make more noise than if they are independently completing a report or taking a test. Obviously, you would not want to have these two activities happening side by side. Therefore, you should try to arrange centers from quiet (e.g., independent study) to noisier level (e.g., group

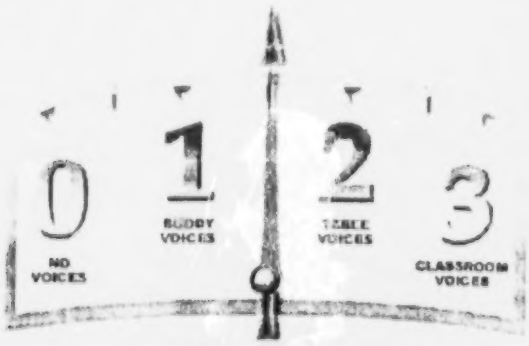
discussion) activities. For example, in one corner of your room you might have students working independently. At the opposite corner, students could be holding a discussion group.

It is helpful to label these different activity areas in your classroom as "centers." As you define the different learning centers, you will want to specify the type of behavior appropriate for each area. If you have a reading center, for example, you might, in consultation with students, decide that books will be returned after use, that quiet reading is expected, and that only a certain number of students can be there at a time.

Janet Banks (1997), a multigrade teacher in the Chimacum School District in Washington state, describes one of the ways she controls the noise level in her classroom:

> *I created a "noise meter" poster that I stick to the chalkboard in front of my class. The chalkboard is magnetized and I move a refrigerator magnet on the poster to indicate the acceptable level of noise. The levels are labeled: 0-No Voices; 1-Whisper or "Buddy" Voices; 2-Table Voices (can only be heard clearly at the student's table); and 3-Classroom Voices (can be heard clearly across the room, useful during whole-class discussions). At the first of the year we practice these different noise levels. In addition, we discuss when the different levels are appropriate and why. Many times during the day I let the students choose which noise level they wish to work at; sometimes I limit choice to a couple of different levels and sometimes I don't.*

The noise meter, as shown below, is a visual reminder of the agreed-upon or appropriate noise level. If the students' noise gets too far above this, they are reminded to work more quietly. If it is necessary to do this again, the children practice saying a phrase in the appropriate voice and volume. This way the students get to practice what their voices should sound like, and they get to hear what it should sound like in the classroom as a whole.



Noise Meter

Using visual barriers to define activity areas

When you decide on your activity centers, it is quite helpful to use your furniture as a means of defining the boundaries of different work areas. Bulletin boards, portable blackboards, bookshelves, and file cabinets work well as dividers. These visual barriers help define the different centers and help isolate the different levels of activity. However, it is quite important that you can see what is occurring at each center from your teacher work area. This will make it much easier to monitor student behavior. For example, if you see that a student is working with another student in the independent area, you can request they work independently or move to a center where talking is allowed.

Teacher resources

It is important to give some thought to the idea of a teacher resource center. This is an area for teacher-controlled resources such as tests, teacher manuals, and assignment files. In addition, this area serves as a place where the teacher meets with individuals or small groups of students. Most teachers simply put a table, bookshelves, file cabinets, and a blackboard in the center.

Student resources

You may wish to place resources used by students in a central location. These may include textbooks, encyclopedias, library books, dictionaries, and student storage. These materials need to be arranged so that students can find and return them independently. This area should be accessible from any center in the room with a minimum of disruption.

Traffic patterns

Once you have identified your activity centers and made some tentative decisions regarding their placement, you must review your floor plan with an eye toward student traffic patterns. Your goal is to enable students to move freely from one activity center to another with minimum disruption. If a student needs a book from the resource center, will he or she have to walk through the quiet area? You should make sure that audiovisual equipment is near an electrical outlet and that science materials needed for an assignment are located in the appropriate areas. Of course, you must also consider that there is clear and safe access to emergency exits.

Pat Reck, a multigrade teacher from Brothers, Oregon, describes how she has organized her classroom to accommodate student traffic:

The drinking fountain, pencil sharpener, and bathroom privileges account for the most out-of-seat traffic jams. Therefore, these are allocated on the same wall and direction [corner] of the room. It seemed reasonable to put paper and pencil supplies and baskets for finished work on top of a bookshelf in this same area and focus study group tables, the teacher resource area, and quiet reading corners on opposite walls so there would be limited traffic, noise, and distractions.

Specifying activity centers for students

When arranging your classroom, ensure that activities that will occur at each work area will be supported by the equipment and materials available. In the individual study area, this means you might use student desks separated from one another to discourage talking; in the pairwork area you could place two student desks together to encourage sharing. You do not want students wandering through different centers seeking electric outlets or water. Furnishings need to be appropriate to the type of activity that will occur at each center.

Accommodating age differences

In multigrade classrooms, it is important to consider the age and size differences among students. For example, consideration should be given to the procedures for finding materials and to the size of the furniture. If you intend to use a materials resource center, then some thought should be given to primary-grade students who may not be able to read. This is quite important if you want to have students find materials independent of the teacher. Several strategies are worth considering. Subject areas could be color-coded and pictures could be used instead of words. Older student helpers could also be used. Remember, your purpose in using centers is to encourage and develop independence.

The physical size differences of students should also be considered. If you have a range of students in your classroom from grades 1 to 7, then the same size furniture will not accommodate these size differences. When reviewing your room arrangement, you might ask yourself whether the different activity areas will work with the range of students in your classroom. For example, are the desks in the independent study area of differing sizes? Can a range of age levels use the discussion area without having to make changes? When planning your floor plan, keep the students you teach in mind—their age and developmental and physical characteristics. Reck from Brothers illustrates the importance of this when she describes how she adjusts to student needs to create a sense of personal space:

> *Children respond to ownership and territorial bases in a multigrade situation. I created a "kindergarten" corner with a floor rug for cut and paste, free reading, coloring, and sprawling! There were tubs of learning games, headsets with children's literature, and lots of manipulatives. This area was for "free" time after curriculum and times when I was one-on-one with others. My sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders felt they needed a "lions den" where they could get away. So the computer room became a large study-table area where they could go and work in pairs and have some freedom from the younger ones. This area should reflect junior high in posters, charts, art work, and visuals appropriate to their age.*

Student belongings

Flexibility is the key to organizing your multigrade classroom. Students are moving from one working group to another throughout the day. Frequently they are also working on an individual task. Due to the flexibility this kind of movement requires, traditional classroom arrangements may not work. For example, assigned seats can limit flexibility. However, it is important that students have a place to store their belongings. Numerous ideas have been developed for storing student belongings. Traditionally, individual desks are used for student storage. However, in the multigrade classroom this may not be appropriate. Some teachers have used tote trays, lockers, or stacked boxes.

Janet Banks shares some of the ways her students arrange and store their belongings:

My students are moving from one working group to another throughout the day. Frequently they are also working on an individual task. Due to the flexibility this kind of movement requires, I have chosen to use tables throughout the classroom instead of student desks. Because students have no desk in which to keep their supplies, I converted a number of lower bookshelves into student cubbies. The local hospital donated numerous dishpans that serve as the main container for supplies such as crayons, pencils, scissors, and other small items.

Below the "Pink Tubs," as the students call them, are kept their three-ring binder, spiral notebook, and clipboard. This system has worked very well for me. However, student cubbies will get a bit too messy from time to time just as desks do. In response to this I have a hand-drawn poster that I have the students color at the first of the year. Additionally, I remind them routinely that being organized will help them with their school work and that a clean cubby is part of being organized.

Another part of my system that has helped with students having the right stuff at the right time of the day is the use of three-ring binders. They carry these with them most of the day as they include nearly everything they need, organized in various sections. The "Pee-Chee" type folders I have them bring at the first of school are turned inside-out and punched with a three-hole punch. They are then labeled (mostly by subject) and used as pocket dividers in their binders. I also ask that students bring a pencil pouch to keep snapped into their binders. This helps them keep track of their pencils.

Explaining Your Room Arrangement

However you choose to arrange your room, you will need to explain the rationale to students and parents. It is often helpful to label each activity center and to include a few simple rules regarding the appropriate behavior for each center. If students help develop the rules and make the signs for the different centers, they are more likely to understand and follow the rules.

If you clearly define each activity center and specify behavior standards, students will have a much easier time. This does not mean that you have a set of strict rules governing the entire classroom. It does mean that you have rules that reflect the purpose of the different areas in the room. For example, you might post a sign over the pairwork area that states the name of the area and explains that only students working quietly in pairs are allowed. It means that in the independent work area, there is no talking, only working independently. However, students need to be introduced to the room, and their behavior needs to be consistently monitored. Robin Lovec, a multigrade teacher from Montana, outlines what is expected of students. This is done very early in the year. She explains:

> *The teacher should be the model and let students watch while you act out the role of the student. Let them hear your thought process as you go through what is expected within the guidelines established for the classroom, and what would happen if you went outside those guidelines.*

Floor Plan Design

The principles of classroom design should be clear. You must decide on several key factors:

- What types of activities will occur in your classroom?
- How will you arrange the room to accommodate these activities?
- How will you communicate to students the different activity areas of your room?
- What behavior is desired in each area? Will students help decide?
- How will you teach students what will be expected in each area and why?

Figures 1 and 2 on the following pages are examples of floor plans organized around the concept of activity centers and cooperative learning centers. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate a semicontained classroom that allows for expansion and reorganization as needed. The following questions may be useful in reviewing these classroom organization plans:

- What activity centers are there? How are they organized in relationship to one another?
- How have the different activity centers been defined? Are the furnishings for each center appropriate for the activities that will occur?
- What effect will traffic patterns have on the intended activities for each center?
- How have the principles of noise and activity level been used in laying out the room?
- What changes would you make if this were your room?
- Will you need to separate the class into two equal parts for "half-class" instruction at any time?

FIGURE 1: Self-Contained Classroom (Organized by Areas of Activity)

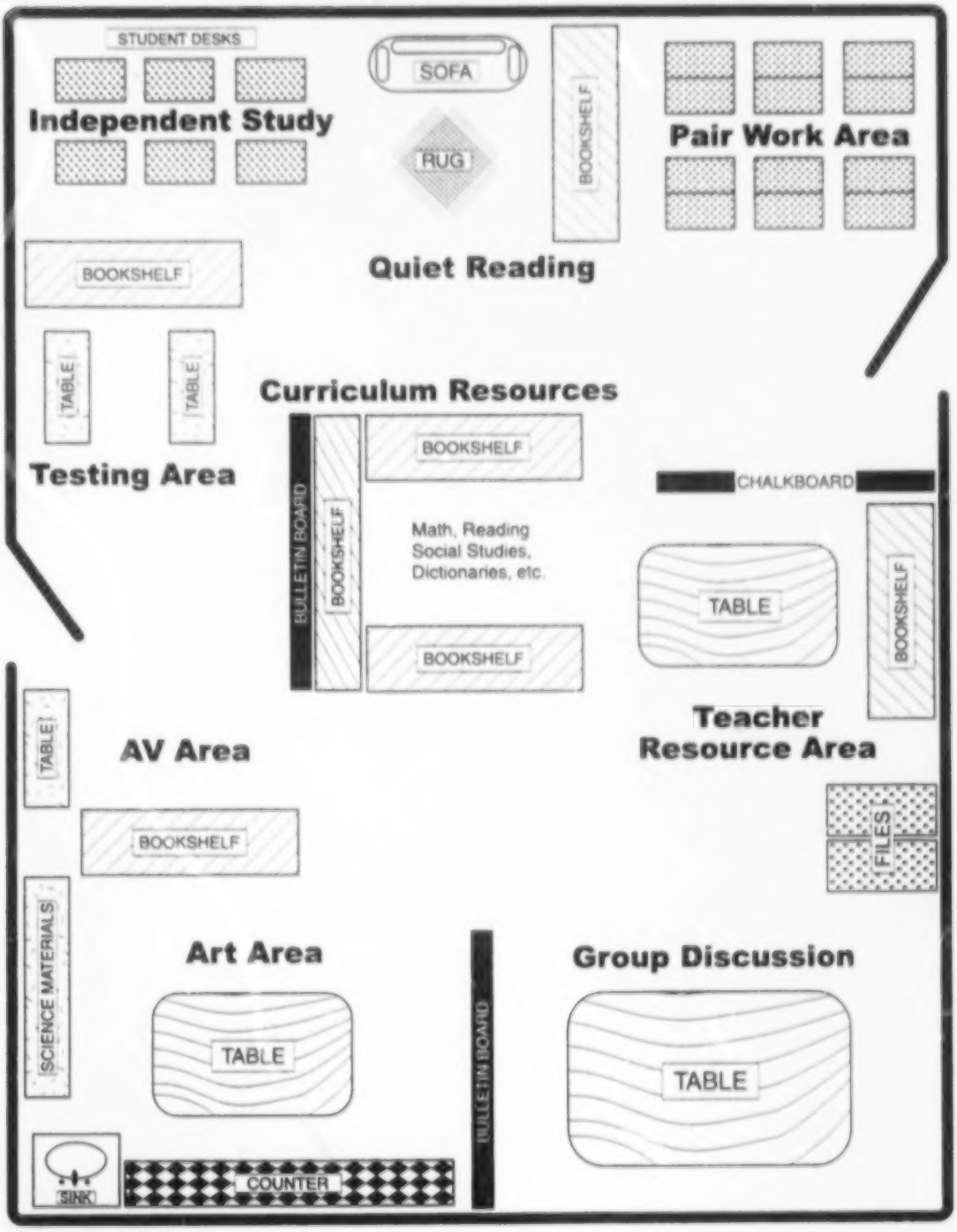


FIGURE 2: Self-Contained Classroom (Organized for Cooperative Learning)

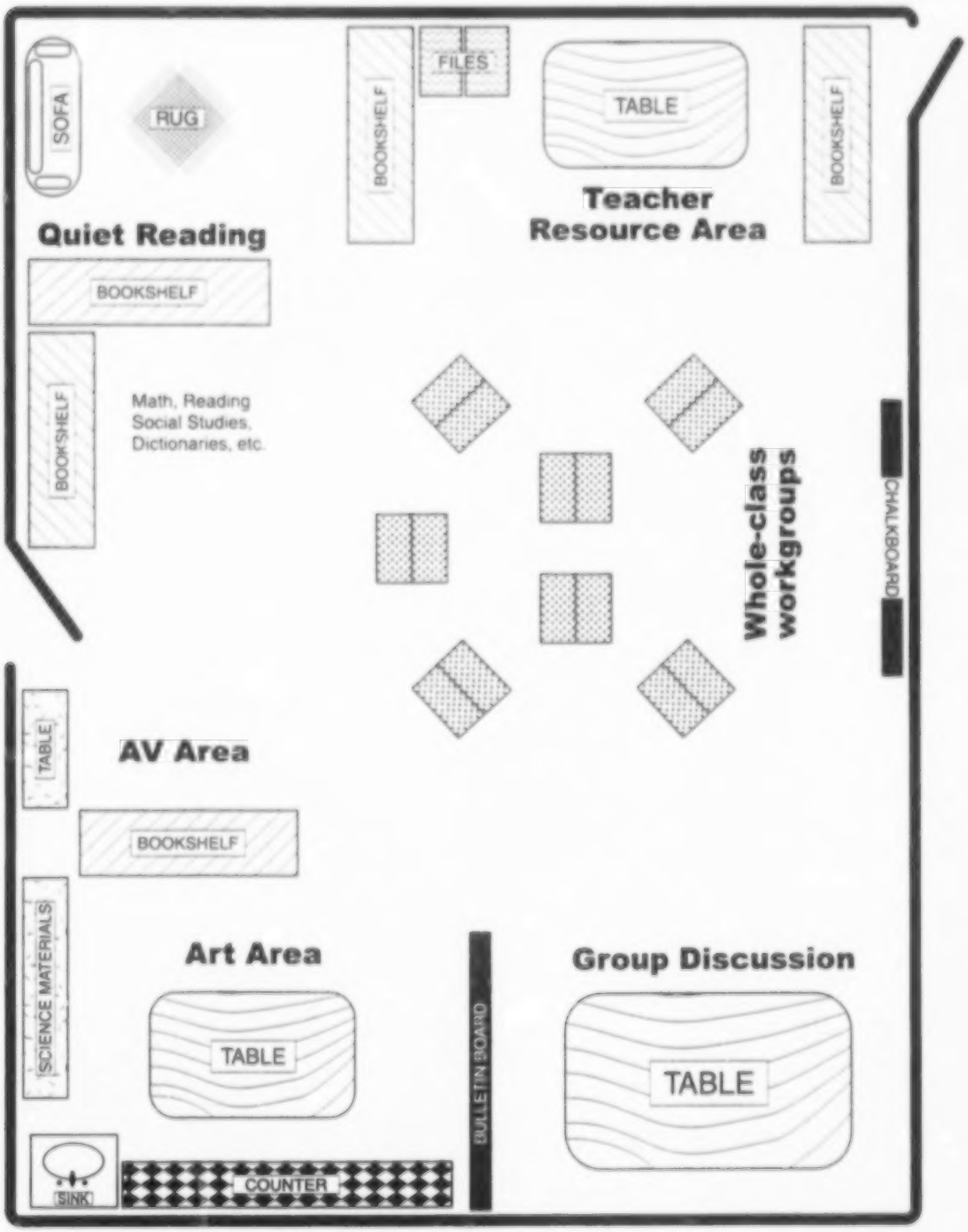


FIGURE 3: Comprehensive Classroom Layout

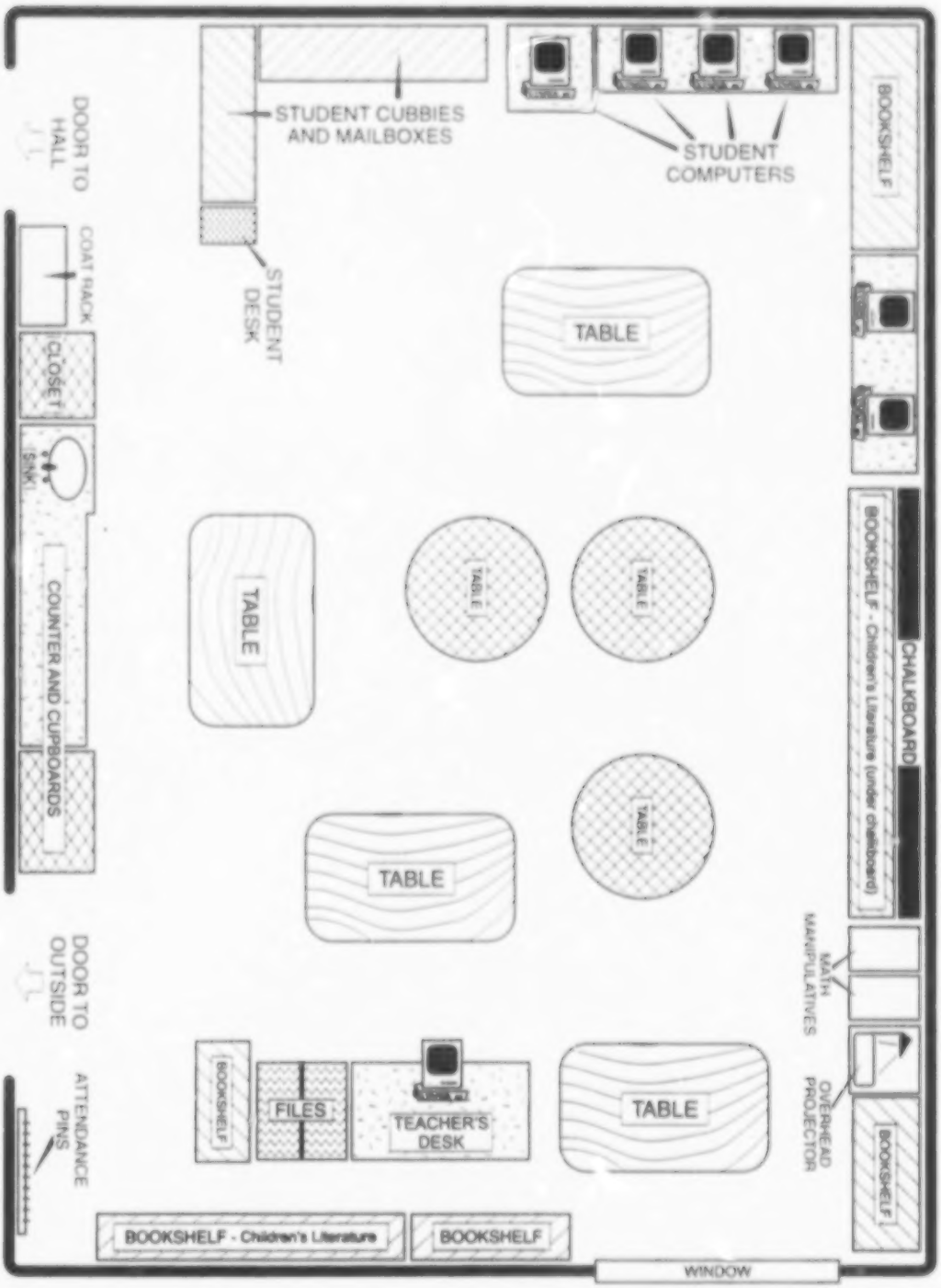
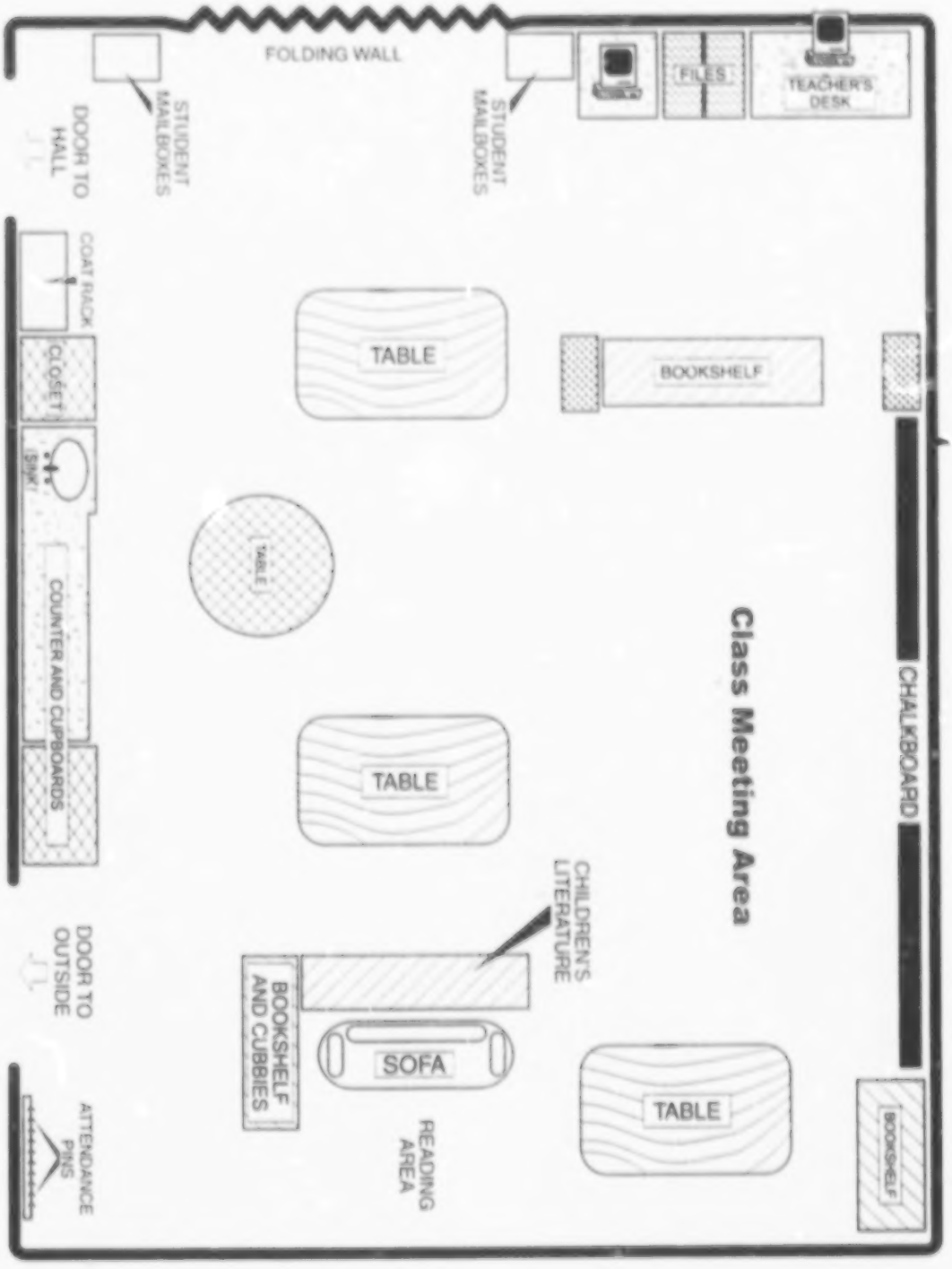


FIGURE 4: Self-Contained Classroom (Organized for Flexibility)



Designing Your Own Room

With a clear understanding of what types of learning you would like to see in your classroom, you are ready to begin laying out your floor plan. Beth Conant (1997), a multigrade classroom teacher and early childhood educator from Washington state, identifies six basic principles to help guide multigrade teachers in designing their classrooms for more efficient instruction. Conant emphasizes the need to look at the physical arrangement of furniture and materials to ensure that it directs how the children are to use the room. Although this is only one way to organize your classroom, it does provide an excellent place to begin. Conant's six guiding principles are:

1. The efficient classroom is a center of learning activities. Furniture and materials in the classroom should directly support the types of learning that occur.

    - Use shelving and furniture to define and separate learning areas. Shelving should be pulled away from and placed at right angles to walls in order to provide barriers to define space. Children stay focused on activities better when they are not distracted by other activities visible in the room.

2. The use of subject-area resource centers is an efficient method of organizing classroom resources. For example, organizing reading materials into a reading center makes sense for several reasons:

    - Pictures of each item or examples of the small items themselves should be taped to the shelf or container where materials are stored. Pictures provide visual cues that help children remember where items belong. Clean-up becomes a learning experience. Later in the year, pictures may be paired with the printed work so that children begin to naturally develop sight-word associations with materials and picture symbols.

    - Display materials simply with a few items on each shelf. A large number of materials on a shelf may be distracting to children who are not used to making choices. Group similar materials in proximity to each other. For example, tubs of small manipulative materials might be shelved together in one unit, and puzzles displayed on shelves of another. With materials in one area, no time is lost trying to locate materials scattered about the room.

    - The arrangement of the center (books, table, chairs, pencils, paper, rug, blackboard, etc.) encourages reading behavior.

3. Classroom arrangement must be flexible to accommodate new learning activities. Learning centers can be rearranged or changed entirely to support the learning activities desired by the teacher. Subject-area center materials are often changed to reflect new units of study.

4. Involve the children in decisions about room arrangement. After you have gotten to know your group and they have become accustomed to you and the classroom, hold a group meeting to discuss with the children how the room is working.

5. Place a picture chart of the sequence of daily activities in a prominent place in the room. The chart helps children to remember what comes next, providing them with a sense of security and control.

6. Quiet and noisy activities need to be in opposing areas of the room. Wet areas such as the sand and water table and art areas need to be well-separated from dry areas such as books, manipulatives, and toys. Housekeeping and block corner, which encourage dramatic play, may complement each other if placed nearby.

Three-Step Design

In laying out your floor plan, you might want to refer to the sample plans introduced earlier. Some teachers have found it beneficial to use small pieces of paper to represent the different types of furnishings. These can then be moved around as desired. Feel free to cut out and use the furnishings found in the sample plan. Be sure to include doorways, sinks, counters, and other permanent structures. If the spaces provided for designing your floor plan are too small, use a blank sheet of paper.

Step 1: Describing the way it is now

Draw a floor plan of the room you will be teaching in. This may be the classroom you taught in last year or a new one.

Step 2: Deciding on the types of activities that will occur

Identify the specific learning activities that will take place in your room and write them on the lines below. It may be helpful to jot down the types of behavior you expect for each activity. You may want to refer to earlier sections entitled, The Activity Centers Approach and General Considerations When Planning.

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____

D. _____

E. _____

F. _____

G. _____

H. _____

I. _____

Step 3: Drawing the final plan

Review your drawing of the classroom in which you will be teaching in terms of the activities you have listed in Step 2. Now, lay out your classroom to promote the learning activities you desire, noting the placement of furnishings, materials, and storage areas.

Conclusion

Whether you choose to organize your classroom around activity centers or not, remember that your floor plan should reflect regular classroom activities. If, for example, you offer lots of cooperative learning activities, you may design your room with several group discussion areas. If you do lots of teaching to large groups, then you will likely have an area where all the students can be seated together.

If your goal is to revise your classroom around activity centers, keep in mind that you don't have to do it all at once. You can allow the classroom to evolve over the year, adding a center at a time as both you and the students become more comfortable with small-group, self-directed learning activities.

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Resources

Bingham, A.A., Dorta, P., McClaskey, M., & O'Keefe, J. (1995). *Exploring the multiage classroom*. York, ME: Stenhouse.

If you are planning to move into multiage grouping or have already made the transition from a conventional classroom, you will welcome the honest, practical advice that makes *Exploring the Multiage Classroom* a genuine handbook: comprehensive, realistic, and accessible. You will see what teachers find rewarding in multiage teaching and why it works so well for children who can learn from the models provided by the literacy and learning of other children around them.

Available from: Stenhouse Publishers
P.O. Box 360
York, ME 03909

Cotton, K. (1995). *Effective schooling practices: A research synthesis*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

This is the third edition of a research synthesis that was first published by NWREL in 1984 and updated in 1990. This edition reflects educational research literature published within the past five years, together with inquiries into topical areas not investigated previously. Like its predecessors, this synthesis cites classroom, school, and district practices that research has shown to foster positive student achievement, attitudes, and social behavior.

Available from: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500
Portland, OR 97204-3297

Dennison, B., Hose, G., Johnson, M., Large, R., Quinn, M., & Fogarty, M. (1978). Rearranging the traditional two-teacher school to fit the linear multiple-area plan. *Teachers' Forum* (Australia), *1*(2), 5–7. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 229 182)

This article describes a plan for converting a traditional two-room school into an open teaching space in which two teachers teach cooperatively. A sample floor plan is presented.

Available from: DynEDRS, Inc.
7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110
Springfield, VA 22153-2852

Yates, R. (n.d.). *Keeping organized: Student cubbies and binders.* Chimacum, WA: Chimacum Elementary School. Retrieved September 27, 2000, from the World Wide Web: www.chimacum.wednet.edu/multiage/sorganiz.html

Students are moving from one working group to another throughout the day. Frequently they are also working on an individual task. Due to the flexibility this kind of movement requires, it is important to use tables throughout the classroom instead of student desks. This book shares ideas on how to organize and manage student belongings.

Available from: Chimacum Elementary School
91 West Valley Road
Chimacum, WA 98325

Yates, R. (n.d.). Resources for multiage education web site. Chimacum, WA: Chimacum Elementary School. Retrieved September 27, 2000, from the World Wide Web: www.chimacum.wednet.edu/multiage/

This Web site is dedicated to helping teachers and administrators interested in multiage education find and gather relevant resources. Here you will find materials that educators have collected, created, or modified along with links to other places on the Web and references to print material that are especially helpful. Of course, this reflects just some of the ways a multiage program can be set up.

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